

Full Length Research Paper

Examining the fragments and causes of increasing out-of-school children in Nigeria

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In spite of various policy initiatives and institutional frameworks, a good number of school-age children roam the streets of Nigeria. Nigeria unduly tops the rank in the total number of out-of-school children in the global scene. Now, about 16 million Out-Of-School Children (OOSC) live in Nigeria, and this means that about one out of five OOSC in the world relate to Nigeria. The number has increased from 8.7 million in 2014 to 13.2 million and 16 million in 2015/2019, respectively. But, this number reduced to 6.95 million in 2020. The breakdown of people in the out-of-school set includes children with disabilities; nomadic groups, comprising of pastoralists and migrants fishing groups; Almajiri students and displaced people due to violent Nigeria conflicts, mostly Northern states like Adamawa, Yobe and Borno. These schools are bedecked with series of schools which have been closed, and they amount to roughly 802, out of which classrooms of about 497 were practically sabotaged, while another 1,392 were entirely damaged. It is absolutely patent that the unadulterated surge in the hiking number of out-of-school children in Nigeria is traceable to the reinforced cases of insecurity, feeble institutional and policy structure, norms and traditions of the people, poverty, and total excommunication of children with disabilities in consideration of policies. This unearthed the OOSC fragments and the plausible instigations of the growing occupants in Nigeria. While this study adopts qualitative approach, it banks largely on secondary data to find out the perplexing population of the out-of-school children. The study concludes that, albeit series of government policy interventions have helped reduce the number of OOSC in 2020, more strategic actions need to be taken to further cushion the growth of the menace of OOSC in the country. Hence, the study proposes some recommendations to reinvigorate the decreasing trend of the OOSC.

Key words: Out-of-school children, causes, Nigeria educational system, legal and policy interventions.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries of the world, development is often a qualitative measure of the literacy rate, the productive

capacity of skilled labour, level of technology, education and so on. Ngene et al. (2018) stated that the educational

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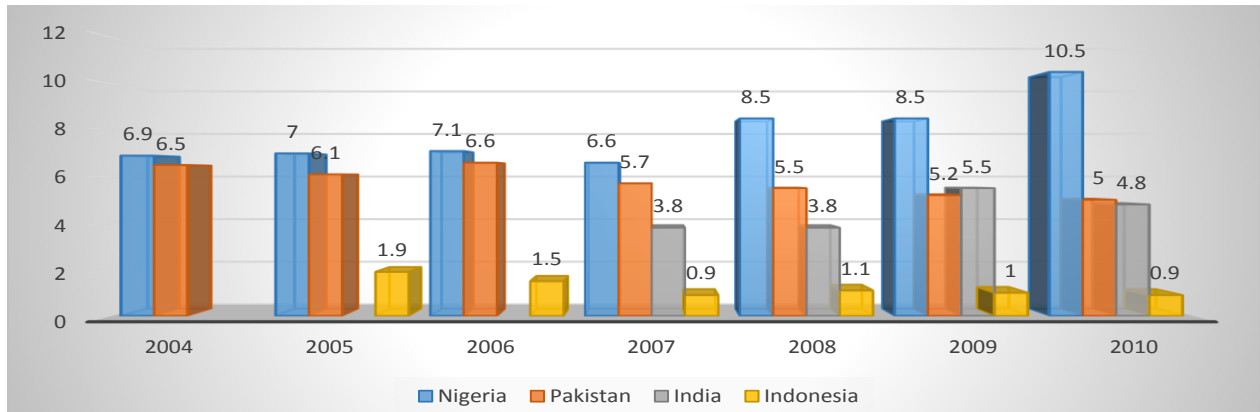


Figure 1. World most ‘out-of-school children’ occupants (in million), 2004-2010. Source: Ritchie (2019).

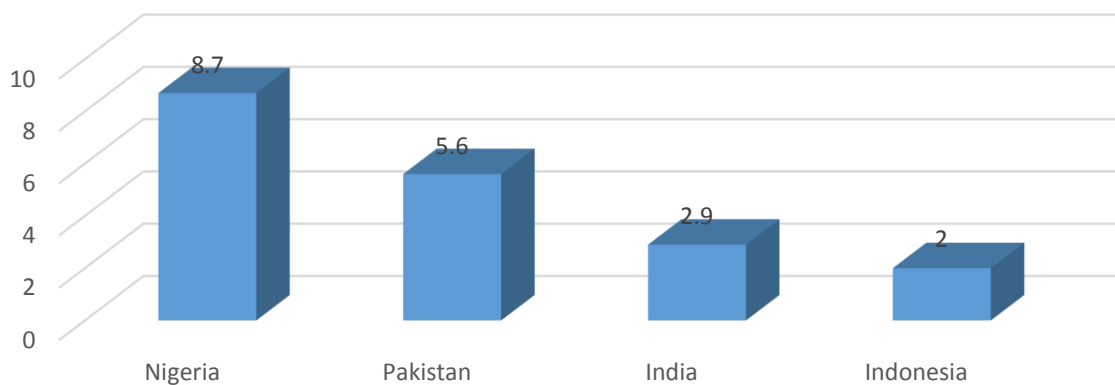


Figure 2. World’s most ‘out-of-school’ children (in million), 2014. Source: Alawode (2018).

system of a state determines the level of its development. With this understanding, the Nigerian government has invested in a series of policy initiatives and other instruments to revitalize its system of education to achieve positive results and outcomes. The National Policy on Education (NPE) introduced the Universal Basic Education (UBE) through the Free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004 providing a policy framework to enforce section 18(3) (a) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended) which was not enforceable like all other rights provided for in Chapter 2 of the 1999 Constitution. By the combined effect of section 18(3) (a) of the Constitution and section 2(1) of the Compulsory Free Universal Basic Education Act 2004, the right to free and compulsory primary education and free junior secondary education for all qualified Nigerian citizens are enforceable rights in Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) has an enforceable mechanism at both federal and state levels.

However, 2019 account for the 20 years of Nigerian government commitment to free and compulsory

education for primary and junior secondary education concerning school children until age 15; jointly referred to as basic education (Nuffic, 2009).

In spite of the policy and institutional structures, coupled with some other actions taken by the government, it is apparent that Nigeria has the highest number of out-of-school children globally. The Sahara Reporters New York (2019) maintained that there are roughly 16million OOSC who are living in the country, Nigeria. This shows that out of five OOSC in the world, one of them is a Nigerian. So, following Bayagon’s (2018) report, 45 percent of the total figure in West Africa originates from Nigeria (Figures 1 and 2).

Giving meticulous consideration to the foregoing, it should, therefore, be stated that this study is aimed to give a phenomenological account of the notion of out-of-school children in order to identify the fragments and the causes of increasing occupants in the context of Nigeria. As such, while the study is delimited to the Nigerian context, it is mainly important as it aims to: first, identify the threat(s) that result(s) in Nigerian children being out

of classrooms. Second, identify the implications of this rising uneducated 'mob' in a fragile and heterogeneous society like Nigeria, and lastly, the study will provide the available legal framework and policy options to remedy the problem. Meanwhile, the ensuing sections encompass the review of literature which unpacks the conceptual clarifications of the study as they relate to out-of-school children in Nigeria and other affected countries of the world. The authors shall also, in the subsequent sections, state the methodological approach adopted for the study, which leads to the results and discussions availed in the work.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overtime, research efforts have been concentrated on the phenomenon of out-of-school children (OOSC). Many of these research works have explored the effects of OOSC on the economy, security, and development of the society within which it is studied. Some have similarly investigated the phenomenon to know its effect on the education system of continents, countries, states and societies at large. For instance, the Bridge International Academies (2017) assessed the methods used in improving education for thousands of children in Nigeria. The UNICEF (2018) similarly conducted a formative evaluation of the out-of-school children initiative (OOSCI).

In a similar vein, The Education Policy and Data Center did a comparison study of the rates of out-of-school children ages 7-14 across India. Olaniyan et al. (2018) also investigated out-of-school children and the demographic dividend in the context of Nigeria. These studies have all examined the notion of out-of-school children concerning different contexts. However, these existing studies have not fully accounted for the state of Out-Of-School Children in Nigeria while identifying the fragments and causes of increasing occupants, thereby providing a solution that would remedy the problem. Just like other studies, if this is understood, the lacunas left behind by these and other previous studies on the concept under discussion engendered the thematic preoccupation of this study.

Children are undoubtedly great assets to a nation's economic and social development, as they are meant to be carriers of a nation's glory and future. It is therefore necessary to ensure that the enthusiasm of these children for education is intact in order to sustain and improve the development of a nation in different dimensions. Contrasting this, the PROBE report (1999) cited in Raina (2001) underscores that the major rationale behind school dropouts is disinterest or a feeling of irrelevance from the child about what he/she is learning.

Hence, while there is focus on strategic policies designed by governments across various levels, unbridled cognizance should be given to children's mental and psychological reactions towards pedagogical activities. Although there are myriads of factors besetting

the mitigation of out-of-school children issue in Nigeria, ranging from cultural superstitious beliefs, poverty, children's disinterest, to mention but few, the fact cannot be disputed that out-of-school children are potential bad eggs in a country's tranquility. More so, parents play significant role in determining children's access to and interest in education; and most parents today indoctrinate their children in nothing but an unbecoming method. This is also contributing to the frequent increase in the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Conceptual clarifications

The magnitude of success which is often attributed to children's enrollment in education has designed the understanding that children of today are causative agents to promoting the development level of a country through proper education.

As a diverse country, Nigeria is invariably part of this. Olaniyan et al. (2018) point out that relevant education is a salient prerequisite for alleviating poverty, empowering women, protecting children from different hazards, sexual exploitation, exploitative labour, promoting human rights and democracy, safeguarding the ambiance and influencing population growth. Contrary to this, the absence of children in school in most societies today poses the community to several dangers. It has been extensively reeled out that children who are out of school are immensely prone to danger of abuse, exploitation and recruitment to bad behaviour. Meanwhile, they can serve as founts to any policy put in place to actualise economic growth and sustainable development, and subsequently demographic dividend (UNICEF, 2019).

It is noteworthy therefore that this process has continued to pose series of challenges to the educational system cum development of the country entirely. Sadly, over 45 per cent of out-of-school children in West Africa are Nigerians, which has the highest number of out of school children in the world. This situation is rather alarming and needs a very drastic action and urgent attention but permits me to hone-in on yet another issue that is close to home (UNICEF, 2019). As a result, it is pertinent to know the fragment of the out-of-school children in Nigeria to provide feasible remedies for this increasing population.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, and data are extensively drawn from secondary sources. As such, data were gathered from online sources based on their yearly estimations of the out-of-school children by different websites; and, of course, journals, books, news platforms, and bodies such as the Ministry of Education, Universal Basic Education Commission, National Commission for Nomadic Education that are charged with the operation of the education system of Nigeria also serve as secondary sources of data gathering.

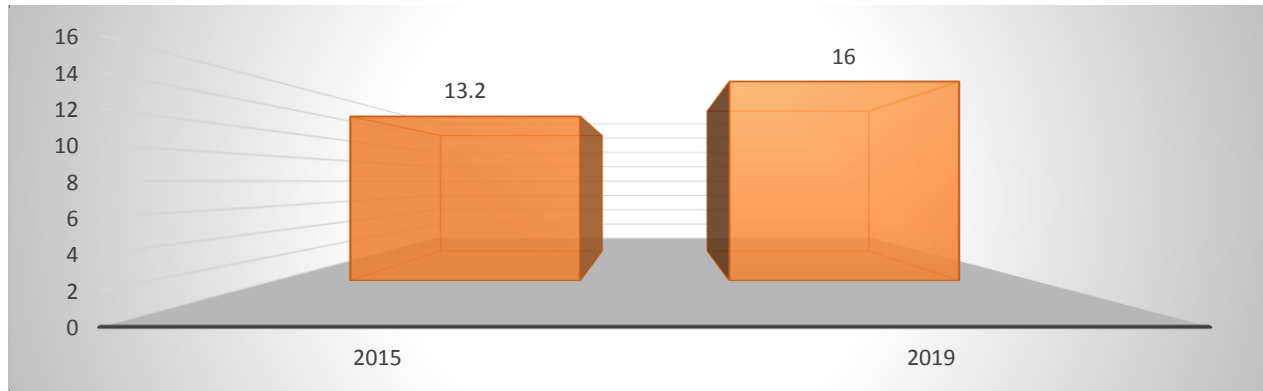


Figure 3. Nigeria and the 'out-of-school children, 2015 and 2019.

Source: Bayagbon (2018) and Sahara Reporters, New York (July 25, 2019).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part of the study presents results and discussions on the major notable composition and occupants of the increasing number of out-of-school children in Nigeria including government efforts through various laws and policies meant to tackle the issue under discuss. Here, the authors present and disinter the findings of the study. The study finds out that, although reduced in 2020 to 6.95 million, the population of out-of-school children in Nigeria remains the highest in the global scene. Children with disabilities are dominantly affected by the menace; and the children of the nomadic also form a tremendous percentage of the OOSC in the country, Nigeria

Out-of-school children in Nigeria: unveiling the 16 million world highest provoking data

Even though primary and post-primary education has been made officially free and mandatory in Nigeria, it is estimated that one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria (Ibid.). Ordinarily, in a saner society, no child is supposed to be deprived of sound and qualitative education, no matter the circumstance. Perhaps the reason Yekeen (2017) opines that all children, no matter their geographical location, or their circumstantial situations, have the right to quality education. In a similar vein, Adamu Adamu, the Minister of Education said that the invariably increasing population of out-of-school children is the strongest proof that Nigeria has failed to achieve one of the Education For All (EFA) goals and Millennium Development Goals of universalizing access to primary education for all school-age children (Worldmeters, 2019). This claim is not unconnected with the fact that Nigeria, with the population of 201million, has overtaken countries like India with population of 1.4billion, Indonesia (with population of 270.6million), and Pakistan (with population

of 216.6million) in the ecumenical cases of out-of-school children.

Although India and Nigeria reduced their rates of children that are out of school (in millions) in 2014, countries like Pakistan and Indonesia added to their numbers. However, Nigeria has sustained its highest number of out-of-school children globally, (Figure 2) and continued increasing since 2014 up until 16million in 2019 (Figure 3), although, fortunately, it has reduced to 6.95million in 2020 (<https://m.guardian.ng>).

As the number is growing, debates have focused on the identity of the groups that make up the number to suggest possible policy options that can address each group. While it is acknowledged that governments at different levels have been taking some laudable steps to curtail the growth of OOSC, the Nigerian government should stop formulating and applying an enveloped policy for different stakes within such a problem (Yagboyaju and Akinola, 2019).The problems of out-of-school have attracted some attention including the application of laws and policies which have not yielded the desired results. However, the following are the major notable composition of the increasing number of out-of-school children in Nigeria:

- a) The disabled children in the country, Nigeria, are predominant constituents of the OOSC population.
- b) Children from nomadic groups, which comprise of pastoralists and migrants fishing groups. This part of the population has immense limits to equitable access to basic education through the conventional education system due to occupational and socio-cultural affinities. There is no doubt that, in Nigeria; there are 5.2million nomadic children of school age of which only 578,374 are currently enrolled in schools (Bayagbon, 2018). The National Commission for Nomadic Education (2019), pointed out that the population of the nomadic pastoralist is estimated to be more than 6.5m while the artisanal migrant fishermen population is estimated to be around

2.8m people. The migrant fisher folks number about 2.8m and are found in the Atlantic coastline, the riverine areas and the river basins in the country. The South East and the Middle Belt zone of the country, Nigeria, constitute some migrant farmers whose population is still mystic. The abovementioned set of people are liable to deploy their children to farms and other craft stations for the immediate benefits of the family, rather than being enrolled in school.

a) Almajiri pupils: These children are invariably exploited by their teachers as street beggars to collect alms. In the words of Ishaku and Oraka (2019), when there is no substantial supervision from the government, students are most likely to collect alms in support of their teachers' livelihoods (National Commission for Nomadic Education, 2019)". This virulent act on the part of the teachers of the almajiri pupils is nothing to write home about, and contributes a great deal in substantiating the number of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

b) Tempestuous conflicts in Nigeria have brought about the displacement of over 1.7 million people, part of which children carry 56% (Ishaku and Oraka, 2019). This has contributed to the worsening situation in Northern Nigeria as the highest hit area of out-of-school children in Nigeria. Essentially, in the northern part of Nigeria, especially in states like Adamawa, Borno and Yobe, millions of children need immediate and emergency supports with their education as a result of incessant conflicts. These conflicts have, of course, led to many schools being shut and some classrooms maliciously annihilated. Similarly, Benue state is one of the worst hit by violence and the number of out of school children in that state has reached the worrisome stage.

Understanding the legal and policy framework interventions in Nigeria and its level of implementation

There are various policy and institutional frameworks that have been put in place to reduce the increasing number/cases of out-of-school children in Nigeria. The following are the major legal and policy instruments to increase the attendance of children in the classrooms in Nigeria:

a) Chapter 2 Section 18(3) (a) of the 1999 Constitution
This section under educational objectives supports the participation of children in education in Nigeria. Subsection 3, having three paragraphs, specifically states that: *Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end, Government shall as and when practicable provide:*

- a) Free, compulsory and universal primary education;
- b) Free university education; and
- c) Free adult literacy programme.

d) Compulsory Free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004

This Act has 16 sections with Schedules that constitute the compulsion of basic education. As the Act mandates it for children to attain the least basic education, it also makes it imperative for the Government, as therein in some sections, to provide necessary tools and facilities for the actualization of this.

a) Child Rights Act, 2003

The Child's Right Act is an Act that is legislated to provide and protect the rights of a Nigerian child; and other related matters. As such, this Act ensures that child's right including the right to education would facilitate their participation in classrooms.

b) National Policy on Education (NPE)

The National Policy on Education (NPE), being the national guideline for the effective administration, management and implementation of education at all tiers of government, is a statement of intentions, expectations, goals, prescriptions, standards and requirements for quality education delivery in Nigeria. Thus, the implementation of this policy would increase the participation of children in the class.

c) Universal Basic Education (UBE) Policy

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) is designed as an educational programme aimed at eradicating illiteracy, ignorance and poverty. This board operates with policies that establish and implement the idea that every child is entitled to free education. Thus, the operations of this board would promote children's participation in classrooms.

d) Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC)

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme is a nine (9) year basic educational programme, which was launched and executed by the government and people of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to eradicate illiteracy, ignorance and poverty as well as stimulate and accelerate national development, political consciousness and national integration. Being aware of this, the programme would enable higher participation of children in classrooms.

e) Nomadic Education Act, Cap N20 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004

The Act is made for the establishment of the National Commission for Education, will among other things, establish, manage and maintain primary schools for nomadic children.

f) National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE).

The National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) was established in 1989 by defunct Decree 41 now Nomadic Education Act, Cap N20 Laws of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 2004, to cater for the educational needs of the socially excluded, educationally disadvantaged and migrant groups in Nigeria. The operations of the commission, thus, have a strong chance to increase the participation of children in the class.

Threats that prevent Nigerian children from attending school

As pointed out earlier, the increasing number of out-of-school children in Nigeria poses a tremendous challenge to the education system of the country. As a result, it is pertinent to examine the factors that prevent these children from attending class, in spite of the ecumenical campaign of education as the best instrument in the wheel of development. Below are some of these threats:

Socio-cultural norms

Parents, especially, in the Northern part of Nigeria are the major scaring 'Lions' sending their children out of school due to religion and cultural beliefs. According to UBEC and UNICEF accounts, 80 per cent of out-of-school children in Nigeria are from Northern Nigeria and mostly because of the belief system. This belief system driven by socio-cultural and religious factors have the following implications:

- i) **Gender:** Gender is the major hit from the effects of religious and cultural beliefs on girl-child school attendance and has become a major causal factor of the out-of-school population in Nigeria. The marginalization of the female population particularly in education is a major challenge in the Northern part of Nigeria. States in the North-East and North-West have primary net attendance rates of 47.7% and 47.3%, respectively. In other words, more than half of the girls not in school are driven by socio-cultural norms and practices that discourage attendance of informal education.
- ii) **Early marriage:** Parents erroneously believe that the girl-child must be married off early instead of wasting their money on education.
- iii) **Book is haram syndrome'** is another major factor (Western education as an abomination).

Insecurity

Violence has been a persistent phenomenon over the

years especially in the North-East and North-West regions of Nigeria where the activities of 'Boko Haram' are predominant. Over 1,500 schools were destroyed between 2014 and 2017 in North-East Nigeria. There were at least 1,280 casualties among teachers and students; over 1,000 students have been kidnapped from their schools by insurgents. In Benue, the Executive Secretary of the State's Teaching Service Board, Wilfred Uji, stated that the incessant herdsmen attacks had disrupted the school calendar and prevented 300,000 children from going to schools (Ibid.).

Exclusion of children with disabilities in the policy drive

Major early education policies and laws excluded children with disabilities and thus, making early education inaccessible to them. Unfortunately, these special Nigerians accounted for a major part of Out-of-School Children in Nigeria.

Poverty

The economic barrier is also a major factor inhibiting children from going to school in Nigeria. Although basic education is free, students are required by most public schools to pay different varying fees for school maintenance, sports and importantly token for feeding including payment for uniform. The present economic situation in Nigeria is seriously affecting parents' readiness to send their children to school, thus, creating an increase in the total number of out-of-school children in Nigeria.

Why Nigeria out-of-school children matters

Children who are not educated are often the most vulnerable to people of questionable characters and also prone to be marginalized. Global Partnership for Education stated that the children who face the most severe barriers to education, such as those associated with gender, poverty, displacement, nomadism, disability, and/or ethnicity, are usually left behind (Ibid.). The implications of these are numerous and usually exhibiting a blink future for the country. With this geometric increase in the out of school children, one may conclude that Nigeria will continue to be affected by the various challenges facing it presently; in fact, the worst of it may continue without any concerted effort to reverse the trend. However, the following are the implications of the increasing out-of-school children in Nigeria:

Breeding of unproductive population: People with no skill-set and lacking basic education are more likely to

become a burden to society. Sequel to the unemployability of the uneducated youths who lack the ability of creativity and innovative ideas to subdue their environment. Most of these Nigerians become redundant and unproductive. This is an unsavory situation for development in any human society. The concomitant effect of a situation like this is an increase in the wave of criminal activities and crimes.

Security challenges: This army of out-of-school children poses a potential threat to the society in future if nothing is done to arrest the situation. This set of Nigerians may become willing tools in the hands of disgruntled politicians and elements who want to foment trouble in society. The current incessant cases of kidnapping and other related criminal activities in Nigeria serve as reminders of the implications of not availing Nigerians the opportunity of having at least basic education. Evidence shows that virtually all indicted and arrested notorious kidnapers are not well educated. They have either basic education or no education at all.

Socio-economic and dependency Implications: One other very serious implication is that it breeds poverty and imposes a heavy dependency burden on well to do relatives. To put education within the context of national development is to appreciate its utility as an engine of economic development, productivity, technology, employment opportunities and individual empowerment. The authors cannot remain lukewarm or nonchalant to the fate of the out-of-school population in Nigeria without endangering her prosperity. The role of education is to unleash the potentials of the Nigerian youth in creative thinking, and systematic skill-set to participate effectively in the fast-changing global market of ideas.

Conclusion

The staggering number of the out-of-school population from 8.7million in 2014 to 13.2million and 16million in 2015 and 2019 respectively is alarming, even though the number decreased a bit in 2020. With its implications understudy, something drastic has to be done to address the issue. The economic development, stability, and national security of the country depend by and large on the measures put in place to manage the present 'mob' of out-of-school children.

Policy recommendations

Hence, the following policy options are recommended:

1) Creation of children with disabilities' schools in each state of the Nigerian federation should be a necessity:

There is a need to cater for children living with disabilities through the creation of children with disabilities' schools in each state of the Nigerian federation;

2) The Ministry of Information and Culture and its orientation agency (National Orientation Agency) should deploy various strategies to persuade parents of the innocuous merit of sending their girls to school instead of the early marriage option. In the scheme of advocacy and orientation, stakeholders such as political leaders, traditional authorities and faith-based organizations should be co-opted into a plan of action into persuading or educating parents to send their children to school, especially the girl-child;

3) The state and local governments have the statutory obligation to make provision for the establishment of primary and secondary education in their areas. They should have the financial support or backing of the federal government to keep the cost of schooling within the range of affordability to parents in line with the Compulsory Free Universal Basic Education Act, 2004; Child Rights Act, 2003; and Chapter 2 Section 18(3) (a) of the 1999 Constitution;

4) Amendment of the Nomadic Education Law is important to expand the National Commission for Nomadic Education (NCNE) mandate that would give incentives to attract the men and children in transit to embrace formal education.;

5) It is paramount to enhance security in the country. School enrolment cannot improve if insurgency in the North-East, North Central and the recent mass kidnappings of students in the North-West remain unattended to. The Nigerian Police, NSCDC, and Nigerian Armed Forces should collaborate to address the issue of insecurity in the country;

6) Nomadic herdsman should be persuaded to accept the ranching system. This is to reduce the incessant confrontation of herdsman with the farming communities around the country;

7) To enhance the attraction of public education, states should invest a certain percentage of their monthly allocation to education, especially training, teaching tools, and the welfare of teachers;

8) The federal government should be committed to free and compulsory basic education by providing necessary technical assistance that would motivate and encourage quality teachings and learning. This strategy should include incentives that could decrease the seeming cumbersome necessities for parents and guardians to enroll their children in schools. In advanced countries like France, the United Kingdom, the United States and a host of others, the cost of education at the primary to the secondary level is the responsibility of the state;

9) In the areas of system design and the availability of teachers for the Almajiri education in the Northern, there is need for its integration with the formal education system and adequate support from the government.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interests.

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